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CSTO informal summit in Astana: renewed fear of colour revolutions

On 12 August the presidents of Armenia, Belorussia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan met in Astana for an informal CSTO (Collective Security Treaty Organization) summit, traditionally held in summer. They discussed a number of issues, but the main focus was on the recent uprisings in the Arab world and the need to consolidate efforts to prevent such developments at home. The sense that the danger is present and clear was reinforced by Belorussian President Lukashenko, whose regime has been under external pressure (the EU imposed economic sanctions and “information war”) after the crackdown on the opposition.

The dramatic downfall of the Tunisian and Egyptian presidents through popular revolt and a similar fate of the Libyan leader understandably worry the long-standing presidents Lukashenko, Nazarbayev and Rahmon. Although Russian President Dmitry Medvedev is a relative newcomer, he shares the concern of his colleagues. CSTO leaders are united in their assessment of the causes of the Arab uprisings and blame external forces. As President Medvedev said to his national anti-terror committee in February after the beginning of war in Libya: “such a scenario was prepared for Russia and used elsewhere”.

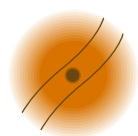
Since the important component of this “scenario” is the use of new information technologies, it was decided to focus on cyber-security and websites working “against the state” and “destabilizing the situation” (this issue was also brought up by President Nazarbayev at the last SCO summit in Astana). It is worth noting that in June this year, the Kazakh government demanded that Google use only servers inside the country (Google refused and

steered traffic away from its Kazakhstan domain) and in August, by decision of a regional court, a number of blogs including the popular LiveJournal have been blocked for distributing illegal data and allegedly promoting the ideas of terrorism and extremism.

As for more traditional warfare methods, participants of the summit decided to speed up the development of the Collective Rapid Reaction Force (CRRF). It is planned to discuss the equipment of CRRF with modern and interoperable armaments at the December summit in Moscow. The force was created to provide collective rapid response to external aggression, counteract threats posed by terrorism and transnational crime, and assist during emergency situations. It cannot be used in conflicts between member-states. The secretary general of the organization Nickolay Borduzha also keeps pointing out that CSTO is not a “police organization” and shall not be used in internal conflicts. In fact, CSTO did not intervene in the Osh crisis despite the request of the Kyrgyz interim government in summer 2010.

Thus, while the sense of internal vulnerability is growing among CSTO member-states, collective security arrangements remain limited. They are ready to cooperate on matters that do not impair sovereignty (cyber-security measures, the necessity of which was discussed at Astana summit, are aimed at strengthening “electronic sovereignty”) and do not imply additional risks. Despite the name of the organization, member states are not yet ready to assume collective responsibility for their security. If indeed a political situation in one of them does start to develop as per the much-feared “scenario”, the regime will be largely on its own.

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Penitentiary system reform: back to the USSR

On 26 July the President signed the decree on the penitentiary system transferring it from the ministry of justice to the ministry of the interior, thus reversing the decision made in 2002 to place the system under the civilian agency following the recommendations of the UN committee against torture. National and international human rights NGOs immediately denounced the decree as undermining Kazakhstan's previous reforms aimed at the modernization and demilitarization of the penitentiary system. They also pointed out that there had been no public discussion of this highly important issue.

According to Penal Reform International, while prisons were under the authority of the justice ministry, Kazakhstan made good progress: the prison population decreased (Kazakhstan moved from third place in the ranking of global prison populations in 2001 to twenty-second place in 2010), public control over prisons increased and the situation with tuberculosis in prisons improved. However, the authorities were clearly less satisfied with the state of affairs. While no official explanation of the decision was given, several articles and interviews appeared in the press portraying the penitentiary system in a negative light, with references to a number of successful and failed jail-breaks, cases of self-mutilation and riots in the last couple of years.

Some experts believe that the real reason behind the move is redistribution of economic benefits. Managing the penitentiary system means controlling a considerable budget. The interest group around the ministry of interior was able to convince the authorities that the justice ministry is incompetent and push through the transfer decision. The interior ministry has already submitted a budget request to the government to finance the cost of making jails, solitary confinement wards and colonies-settlements comply with European standards.

It is worth noting that this has been an unfortunate year for the ministry of justice. In addition to the penitentiary system, it lost the function of registration and documentation of the population to the ministry of interior. This trend is pushing Kazakhstan towards becoming a police state.

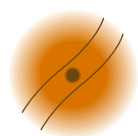
Strengthening economic ties with South Korea

On 24-25 August, the president of the Republic of Korea Lee Myung-bak made an official visit to Astana upon the invitation of President Nazarbayev. The two heads of state paid each other complements on the economic achievements of their countries and signed a number of agreements. Among the most important are contracts for South Korea to build a petrochemical complex in Atyrau and a thermal power station in Balkhash. The agreements are worth almost \$9 billion. It is envisioned that South Korean companies will build four satellite-cities around Almaty (the estimate of the project is \$20 billion). Kazakhstan also hopes to benefit from Korean technological expertise – an agreement was signed on the creation of the new JV Kazakhstan-Korea technological cooperation centre.

South Korea and Kazakhstan have always had good relations. Korean businesses have been active in Kazakhstan since the early days of independence, partially due to the presence of a small but economically important Korean minority in the country. According to foreign affairs minister Yerzhan Kazykhanov, these relations are now entering “a qualitatively new level of strategic partnership.” Such a partnership can help Kazakhstan with its modernization plans and also counterbalance the growing role of China in its economy.

Foreign ministry denounces MEP Paul Murthy's support of the oil strike

The strike of oil workers in western Kazakhstan that started in May suddenly acquired an international dimension. In mid-July European parliament member Paul Murthy (Ireland's Socialist Party)



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visited Mangystau region and met the strikers, resulting in the European Parliament sending a letter to President Nazarbayev urging him to find a peaceful solution to the oil workers' dispute. The Kazakh ministry of foreign affairs officially criticized the visit and accused Murthy of "interference in Kazakhstan's internal affairs." Murthy's statements in support of Natalya Sokolova, a lawyer and activist charged with organizing social disturbances, was denounced as "attempt to influence the trial".

The Kazakh government wants to develop closer ties with the EU and its institutions, and is ready to make multiple commitments and promises concerning political liberalization and democratization. However, it does not want any scrutiny of its actions that would expose the real state of affairs. As Murphy's colleague, MEP Marek Migalsky said, the tough statement of the Kazakh foreign ministry is "reminiscent of statements made by dictators in Europe and other parts of the world" who often react in such a way, saying that somebody is interfering in their internal affairs. In his opinion, it would be better if Kazakhstan joins efforts with the European community in the sphere of democratization.

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